SPORT

Gauff leads US past Greece into United Cup semis

PERTH: The US reached the semi-finals of the United Cup mixed team tournament after beating Greece 2-1 in Perth on Wednesday, as Coco Gauff defeated Maria Sakkari before returning to clinch victory for the defending champions in the doubles.

Gauff, a two-time Grand Slam champion, beat Sakkari 6-3, 6-2 in an hour and 26 minutes to put the US in front.

The 21-year-old had lost in three sets to world number 42 Jessica Bouzas Maneiro when the US took on Spain in Group 'A' on Monday, but she shot out of the blocks against Sakkari and quickly racked up a 5-0 lead.

Sakkari showed some resistance, winning three straight games, but Gauff held serve to take the opening set before breaking the Greek twice in the second set to wrap up the win.

Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas then earned a 6-4, 7-5 win over world number nine Taylor Fritz to level the tie.

The 27-year-old was afforded little time to savour his first top 10 win since 2024, however, returning to the court just half an hour later alongside Sakkari to take on Gauff and Christian Harrison.

Momentum swung wildly in the hard-fought decider, with both teams taking a set apiece to send the match into a tiebreak.

The US raced into a 5-0 lead in the tie-break, and though the Greek duo rallied to level at 6-6 a perfectly placed volley from Harrison squeezed through Tsitsipas's legs and sealed a 4-6, 6-4, 10-8 victory.

"I thought it was great level throughout, we just played free and aggressive," Gauff said.

World number two Iga Swiatek did her bit for Poland in the tie against the Netherlands in Sydney.

Six-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek beat 97th-ranked Suzan Lamens 6-3, 6-2 before Hubert Hurkacz, on his way back after being out for seven months following knee surgery, defeated Tallon Griekspoor 6-3, 7-6 (7/4) as Poland sealed their last-eight spot.

Poland will play hosts Australia, with the winner facing the US for a place in Sunday's final.

In Perth, Switzerland'a Belinda Bencic beat Solana Sierra 6-2, 6-2 but a 7-5, 6-4 loss by Stan Wawrinka to Sebastian Baez sent the tie into a mixed doubles decider.

The Swiss finished off the win with Bencic and Jakub Paul clinching the winning point over Maria Lourdes Carle and Guido Andreozzi 6-3, 6-3.

The mixed-team United Cup features 18 teams and serves as a build-up towards the Australian Open, which starts on January 18.—Agencies

BRISBANE: Russia's Mirra Andreeva hits a return during her Brisbane International match against Olivia Gadecki of Australia on Wednesday.—Reuters

Medvedev extends strong start to season ahead of Australian Open

BRISBANE: Former world number one Daniil Medvedev extended his impressive start to the season ahead of the Australian Open with a straight-sets win over Frances Tiafoe in Brisbane on Wednesday.

The top seed took just an hour to defeat the American 6-3, 6-2 following his equally ruthless first-round win over Hungary's Marton Fucsovics on Monday.

Medvedev served superbly against Tiafoe and didn't face a break point in reaching the third round.

The 29-year-old Russian has conceded that the world's top two, Carlos Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner, are out of reach of the other players on the men's tour.

But he also said that anything could happen at a Grand Slam and he has shown in the first two rounds in Brisbane that he will be one of the challengers when the Australian Open starts on January 18.

"I'm really happy with the way I played the two matches," said Medvedev, a three-time beaten finalist at the Melbourne major. "It's kind of continuing what I started doing at the end of the last year, already playing better and better. But these two matches [this week] I think were even better and I'm happy that some things I worked on in the pre-season seemed to work here."

Defending champion Jiri Lehecka was forced to retire from his match against Sebastian Korda of the United States.

Korda won the first set and they were on serve in the second when Lehecka pulled out with an ankle injury.

In the women's draw, second seed and world number three Amanda Anisimova had a straightforward win over Australia's Kimberly Birrell, 6-1, 6-3.

Rising Russian star Mirra Andreeva, 18, had a tougher fight before seeing off Australian qualifier Olivia Gadecki 4-6, 6-1, 6-2.—AFP

RABAT: Algeria's Adil Boulbina shoots to score during the Africa Cup of Nations round-of-16 match against the Democratic Republic of Congo at the Prince Moulay El Hassan Stadium.—AFP

Boulbina stunner takes Algeria through, Diallo sparkles for Ivory Coast

RABAT: Adil Boulbina and Amad Diallo stole the show as Algeria and Ivory Coast scored contrasting last-16 victories in Morocco on Tuesday to complete the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-finals line-up.

A stunning strike from substitute Boulbina with one minute of extra time remaining gave Algeria a 1-0 victory over the Democratic Republic of Congo in Rabat after an intense clash.

Diallo scored the opening goal and created the second as defending champions Ivory Coast overcame west African neighbours Burkina Faso 3-0 in Marrakesh.

While winger Diallo plays for Manchester United, who attract worldwide support, midfielder Boulbina lines up with Al-Duhail in the relative obscurity of the Qatari league.

"We fought as a team. Everyone is focused on contributing in whatever way they can. There is also a real chemistry on the pitch, a closeness between us that makes our play more fluid," said Diallo.

"There is a genuine connection, a certain rhythm in the way we play. No one is trying to be the hero or to shine individually for the country. If I have the chance to make the pass, I do it. It is instinctive — I give my teammate the ball. That is how we play."

A mouth-watering quarter-finals line-up begins on Friday when Senegal face Mali and Cameroon tackle hosts Morocco. On Saturday, Algeria face in-form Nigeria, then Ivory Coast take on record seven-time title-holders Egypt.

The cagey clash between Algeria and DR Congo was edging towards a penalty shoot-out when Boulbina was released on the left in the 119th minute and advanced into the area before unleashing a vicious strike into the net.

The moment of magic sparked wild celebrations within the ground, with the majority of the 18,837 crowd backing Algeria.

Boulbina was an unlikely hero, making just his second cameo appearance off the bench at the tournament having been included in the squad after featuring for Algeria at the recent Arab Cup in Qatar.

"I have always dreamed of playing for the national team. It is the ambition of every Algerian to play for their country and do well," said Boulbina, who was in tears at the end. "I had my chance and scored and the most important thing is that we won and qualified for the next round."

DR Congo can console themselves with the fact they have an intercontinental play-off to come in March, where a win against New Caledonia or Jamaica will see them qualify for a first World Cup since 1974.

"We are obviously disappointed with the outcome. I thought it was a top-level game between two really good sides," said coach Sebastien Desabre. "The players gave everything. We fought to the end but unfortunately it was not enough."

The match in Rabat, between two of the continent's leading nations, had the makings of the tie of the round but never quite lived up to its billing.

There was a lack of quality in the final third from both sides despite all the attacking talent on the pitch, with neither captain Riyad Mahrez nor the thrilling Ibrahim Maza lasting 90 minutes for Algeria.

In Marrakesh, Diallo sparkled as Ivory Coast became the first AFCON defending champions to reach the quarter-finals since 2010.

Diallo struck the opening goal and created the second for Yan Diomande before half-time. Substitute Bazoumana Toure completed the scoring in the closing minutes.

Since Egypt successfully defended the title in Angola 16 years ago, seven title holders have failed to reach the last eight. Cameroon and Senegal made last-16 exits, Zambia, Ivory Coast and Algeria were eliminated after the group stage, and Egypt and Nigeria failed to even qualify for the tournament.

There was a sense of inevitability when the Ivorians went ahead on 20 minutes. Diallo powered his way past several defenders before striking the ball beyond goalkeeper Herve Koffi Such was the control of the Elephants that it came as no surprise when they increased their lead after 32 minutes on a cold night.

Diallo was the provider this time. Passing the ball across the box to 19-year-old Diomande, whose superbly bent shot gave Koffi no chance.

Substitute Toure scored his second goal in as many matches when he ran from his own half on 87 minutes, then slammed the ball past Koffi.—AFP

MARRAKESH: Ivory Coast's Amad Diallo (L) and Arsene Kouassi of Burkina Faso vie for the ball during their Africa Cup of Nations round-of-16 match at the Grand Stadium.—AFP

Neymar extends Santos deal through 2026, eyeing World Cup return

SAO PAULO: Neymar has agreed to extend his contract with Santos until the end of 2026, the Brazilian club said on Tuesday, as he maintains hopes of a World Cup call-up despite recent injuries.

The 33-year-old forward returned to his boyhood club Santos in January 2025 and played a key role in their survival in the Brazilian top flight, scoring five times in their last five matches.

"Santos is my place, I'm at home," Neymar said in a video published on the Brazilian club's social media. "It's with you that I want to achieve the dreams that are still missing," he added, referring to Santos' fans.

Neymar, who has long struggled with injuries, underwent successful arthroscopic surgery on his knee last month.

The former Barcelona and Paris St Germain star, Brazil's all-time top scorer with 79 goals, has not featured for the five-time World Cup winners since 2023. Manager Carlo Ancelotti said in October he must be fully fit to earn a recall.

Brazil will face Scotland, Morocco and Haiti in Group 'C' of the World Cup, running from June 11 to July 19 in Canada, Mexico and the United States.—Reuters

Juventus bounce back as Roma, Como stay in CL hunt

ROME: Juventus bounced back from their humiliating draw at home against lowly Lecce at the weekend with a 3-0 win at Sassuolo on Tuesday to reclaim fourth spot in Serie A.

Canadian forward Jonathan David was the architect of Juve's victory with a goal and an assist for the team's fourth win in five matches.

Dominant but wasteful, Juventus could thank home player Tarik Muharemovic for their opening goal after 16 minutes with the Sassuolo defender turning into his own net.

Meanwhile David made up for his missed penalty in the 1-1 draw against Lecce on Saturday setting up Fabio Miretti for his team's second goal after 62 minutes.

A minute later the Canadian added the third himself after taking advantage of a poor clearance from Sassuolo goalkeeper Arijanet Muric.

Luciano Spalletti's side are fourth with 36 points from 19 games, but have played two more matches than the top three — leaders Inter Milan with 39 points, AC Milan on 38 points and champions Napoli on 37 points.

"It's a win that comes at the right time for me, but the most important thing is that we're back to winning ways," David insisted.

"He played a very good match; his game against Lecce was already very good, right up until his penalty, but for us, he had nothing to prove. We know the player he is," said Spalletti.

However Juve's fourth spot is under threat from AS Roma, who also have 36 points, and Como, on 33 points, with both teams winning their matches on Tuesday.

Attacking duo Evan Ferguson and Artem Dovbyk scored for Roma in a 2-0 win at Lecce after Como earlier swept aside struggling Pisa 3-0 for their third consecutive league win.

Roma secured their first away win since November 23 thanks to on-loan Irish forward Ferguson after 14 minutes with Ukrainian Dovbyk adding a second after 71 minutes.

But both Juventus and Roma will also have to be wary of Como who has played one less game than both as they target a Champions League qualifying spot.

"I never look at the standings, even though a member of my staff told me to look at them today after our victory. I'm not interested in them," Como's Spanish coach Cesc Fabregas insisted.

Maximo Perrone put the northerners ahead after 68 minutes with Anastasios Douvikas adding two more on 76 minutes and a late penalty after 96 minutes of play.

Como's French goalkeeper Jean Butez, one of the revelations of the season in Italy, saved a penalty six minutes from time.

The Lombardy club, owned by Indonesian billionaires the Hartono brothers, are back in the top flight since 2024 after a 21-year absence, have a game in hand against AC Milan, which they will play on March 15.

Newly-promoted Pisa, who have won only once in 19 matches, remain bottom of the table with 12 points the same as Fiorentina and Verona.—AFP

REGGIO EMILIA: Juventus' Jonathan David (C) shoots during the Serie A match against Sassuolo at the Mapei Stadium.—AFP

Muzammil downs Aqeel to lift title

By Our Sports Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Muzammil Murtaza defeated veteran Aqeel Khan 7-6 (7/2), 6-2 to clinch the men's singles title in the Begum Kulsum Saifullah Khan National Ranking Tennis Championship, which concluded here at the PTF Complex on Wednesday.

In a tight opening set, both players traded points before Muzammil won the tie-break that gave him the momentum to race through the second set and wrap up the match.

The boys' under-18 singles final between Hamza Roman and Abubakar Talha was a tighter affair with the former eventually winning 6-4, 7-6 (7/4).

Mohammad Junaid beat Mohammad Muaz 6-1, 6-4 in the boys' under-14 final while Mohammad Ayan eased past Mohammad Daniyal 4-1, 4-1 in the boys' under-12 title clash.

Farhan wins National Under-17 Snooker crown

KARACHI: Farhan Ali of Punjab overwhelmed Islamabad's Daniyal Shahzad 4-0 to clinch the National Under-17 Snooker Championship here on Wednesday. The frame scores in an utterly dominant victory for Farhan were 59-40, 79-33, 71-11, 65-21.

Farhan had earlier prevailed 4-1 (59-1, 62-49, 82-43, 45-77, 67-10) in the semi-final against Musa Tanveer while Daniyal had beaten Mohammad Kasan 4-2 (70-45, 54-37, 61-48, 31-64, 35-70, 67-30).—Sports Reporter

Forest winning penalty a joke, says West Ham's Soucek

LONDON: West Ham United midfielder Tomas Soucek described the decision to award Nottingham Forest a match-winning 89th-minute penalty as a joke on Tuesday after a defeat that left his side in deep relegation trouble.

Grizzled Czech Soucek had a hand in West Ham going in front after 13 minutes when his flick-on went into the net off Forest defender Murillo. But Forest levelled after the break through Nicolas Dominguez and Morgan Gibbs-White tucked away the winner from the spot after being clattered by West Ham keeper Alphonse Areola.

Areola had been trying to intercept a ball into the crowded area but mistimed his punch and connected instead with the face of Gibbs-White and referee Tony Harrington awarded the penalty after a VAR check.

Defeat left West Ham in 18th place, seven points behind Forest who sit one place above the relegation zone.

"For me it is a joke. I just saw it again and I think we can have 20 penalties per game if it is like that," Soucek said of the incident. "I came to the Premier League because I thought it was the toughest league in the world and we are all fighters and warriors, but this looks more like basketball when you can't touch the player. This is what I saw.

"[Areola] came for the ball, I think I cleared it and that was already out. We didn't know why there was VAR and then the penalty, so it was tough for all of us."

West Ham are now winless in 10 league games and manager Nuno Espirito Santo is under severe pressure after only two league wins since taking charge in September, following his sacking by Forest three games into the season.

Soucek insisted the squad were still fully behind Espirito Santo but admitted West Ham were in big trouble.

"We have so many games but we have to do it from the first game. Now is the time. We have to be winning. Seven points, we cannot just win one or two, we have to win a few in a row," he said. "I still believe and will until the end, but I have to say that we are in a really bad position. We will look to the mirror and know the position we are in. Nobody from the squad wants to play second division."—Reuters